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The Children of the East

Introduction

This article will explore the identity of “the children of the East” (*bene qedem*) who are mentioned at least ten times in the Old Testament (OT), and will examine the destiny of these people in the course of history beyond OT times. The article seeks to answer the question of whether the children of the East are to be identified with the Arabs, the Persians, or some other people-group. I will further examine any possible connection or relationship between the children of the East and Islam. The study will focus particularly on the biblical material relevant to “the children of the East” and Arabs, but will also summarize what can be known of the history of these people beyond biblical times.

The “Children of the East” in the Bible

The phrase *bene qedem* “sons/children/people of the East” occurs (by itself) ten times in the Hebrew Bible (HB), while the parallel phrase “land of the East” is found once, the fuller expression “the land of the people of the East” occurs once, and the phrase “the mountain(s) of the East” occurs twice, for a total of fourteen references. Other references about dwelling in the East which appear to be relevant will be considered.¹ I will take up

1 All passages are cited from the NKJV unless otherwise noted. I do not look at Gen 2:8 where God plants a garden “eastward in Eden,” nor Gen 3:24, where cherubim are placed “at the east of the Garden of Eden,” nor Gen 4:16, with Cain’s dwelling “in the land of Nod on the east of Eden,” inasmuch as these passages are directions related to the Garden of Eden before the Flood and do not seem to be relevant to the identity of the “People of the East” in patriarchal times and later. Likewise, Gen 11:2 describes the inhabitants of the ark and their descendants traveling in an easterly direction (*miqqedem* here with a verb of

each occurrence in the canonical order of the HB (with the exception of the reference in Job, which belongs with Genesis chronologically and by authorship) and seek to identify these people in light of the immediate context and other relevant data in the OT. Brief mention will be made of New Testament (NT) references to the “East.”

Gen 10:26-30: “Joktan begot Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab. All these *were* the sons of *Joktan*. And their dwelling place was from Mesha as you go toward Sephar, the mountain of the east [*har-haqedem*].”

In the “Table of Nations” of Gen 10, the genealogy of the nations descended from Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Shem’s son Aram and his descendants, the Arameans, are discussed below. Another of Shem’s sons, Arphaxad, begot Salah, Salah begot Eber, and Eber begot two sons: Peleg and Joktan. The location of where the various descendants of Shem settled is not given in Gen 10, except in regard to the thirteen sons of Joktan, Shem’s great-great grandson (listed above). All of these were said to have dwelt “from Mesha as you go toward Sephar, the mountain of the East.” Mesha can tentatively be identified with *Mesene* at the northwest end of the Persian Gulf, and Sephar may be Dofar (ancient *Saprapha* of Ptolemy and Pliny), on the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula, near which is a high mountain which may be identified with the “mountain of the East” (Nichol 1976-1980:1:281).² The names of Sheba (Sabaeans)

motion means “eastward” and not “from the east” as in some translations; cf. Gen 13:11; (see Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1907, s.v. *qedem*) from the place where the ark landed, and does not describe a land or people in the east, and thus will not be considered. Many commentaries argue that “movement to the east in Genesis is in the context of judgment (4:16) or vanity (11:2, 13:11) or alienation (25:6). The same is true of Jacob. The journey to the east is filled with heartaches and is far from the ideal” (Hamilton 1995:252; Mathews 1996:257, 478; Matthews 2005:355, 461). It is far from certain that all references to “east” in Genesis have a symbolic meaning of judgment or vanity or alienation or rejection. Context must be taken into account in each case, especially since the “east” can also be the place from which deliverance comes in some passages of Scripture (e.g., Isa 41:2, 25, 46:11; Rev 16:12) and constitutes the orientation of the sanctuary (beginning in Eden, Gen 2:8; cf. Exod 27:13-16, 36:20-30, 38:13-18; implied in 1 Kgs 7:39; 2 Chr 4:10; Ezek 47:1).

2 Two of these names of the sons of Joktan are also attributed to the descendants of Cush, son of Ham, in particular Sheba and Havilah (see Gen 10:7, 29; 1 Chr 1:9, 23). Horn 1979:1016 suggests that “the Joktanite Sabaeans are probably the *Saaba* of northern Arabia mentioned in the inscriptions of Tiglath Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) and Sargon II (722-705 B.C.) as allies of the *Aribi* (Pritchard 1969:283, 286),” while the Cushite Sabaeans are associated with the Queen of Sheba and lived in the area now called Yemen (1015). Conversely, Horn 1979:464, puts the Cushite Havilah in the northwestern part of Arabia and the Joktan Havilah in southern Arabia.

and Ophir (whence came fine gold and precious stones, 1 Kgs 9:28, 10:11; 22:48; Job 22:24) are clearly associated with southeast Arabia. Hence, the first group of nomadic tribes connected with the land of the East are the Joktan tribes in the southern and southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula.

Genesis 25:5-6: “Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Abraham’s sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East [*’erets qedem*]” (NJPS).

This text is programmatic for later references in the OT to the “people of the East.” The passage summarizes the fate of all of Abraham’s children. Isaac was to receive his inheritance in Canaan, and the rest of his sons, born by his “concubines” (a word that refers to both Hagar and Keturah, see Davidson 2007:186) were sent “eastward, to the land of the East.”³

These sons of Abraham not born by Sarah include, first of all, Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn son, whom Hagar, Sarah’s handmaid, bore to him. Ishmael had twelve sons who became “princes according to their nations” (Gen 25:12-16), in fulfillment of the divine promise to Hagar that God would “multiply [her] descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude” (Gen 16:10), which was expanded to Abraham: “Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation (Gen 17:20).⁴ According to Gen 25:13-15, “These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah” (ESV). At least six of the twelve tribes descending from Ishmael are mentioned in cuneiform inscriptions dealing with the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, and other tribes also can be identified with various geographical locations in the Arabian Peninsula, mostly in the northern part.⁵ The Ishmaelites are specifically indicated as living “from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt as you go toward Assyria” (Gen 25:18). The NJPS aptly translates: “They dwelt from Havilah, by Shur, which is close to Egypt, all the way to Asshur; they camped alongside all their kinsmen.”

3 Mathews (2005:461) speaks of the reference to “eastern” as having a “double meaning” conveying both “geographical direction” and a spiritual description of “Abraham’s rejected children.” I do not see in this passage any hint that Abraham’s other children (besides Isaac) were “rejected,” just because they were not of the special covenant line. Note especially the promises given regarding the descendants of Ishmael, discussed below.

4 For a discussion of the positive promises made to Hagar about Ishmael and his descendants, see for example Maalouf 2003:43-96.

5 The evidence is summarized in Maalouf 2003:151-156; see also Eph’al 1984:233-240.

The biblical texts show a close link and friendly relationships between the Ishmaelites and Israel during the period before the Divided Monarchy. There was intermingling between the tribe of Simeon and the Ishmaelites (cf. Gen 25:13 and 1 Chr 4:25). David's sister married "Jether the Ishmaelite" (1 Chr 2:17). Among David's top administrators were "Obil the Ishmaelite" and "Jaziz the Hagarite" (1 Chr 27:30-31). David seems to have had friendly relationships with the Ishmaelites, nor were they the victims of his various raids into the southern lands (1 Sam 27:8; cf. Gen 25:18).

The other sons of Abraham included in this passage whom Abraham sent "eastward into the country of the East" are the six sons of Keturah, Abraham's wife after Sarah died (Gen 25:1). According to Gen 25:2, these included "Zimran, Kokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah." Several of the tribes bearing these names appear in cuneiform inscriptions and geographical place names mostly in the central part of Arabia.⁶ The son of Abraham by Keturah whose descendants appear most often in the biblical text is Midian. The Midianites were a nomadic people "who ranged from the southern part of the peninsula of Sinai (Exod 3:1) northward to the Gulf of Aqabah (1 Kgs 11:18) and as far as the plains east of Moab (Gen 36:35; Num 22:4, 25:1, 6; Josh 13:21). Moses' father-in-law Jethro was a Midianite (Exod 3:1).⁷

The Midianites early-on intermingled through marriage (and profession) with the Ishmaelites, descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son through Hagar. This is evidenced by the description of the camel caravan that bought Joseph from his older brothers, described as "Ishmaelites coming from Gilead" in Gen 37:25, but three verses later described as "Midianite traders" (Gen 37:28).

6 See Eph'al 1984:231-233; cf. SDABC, 1:367. For examples, Zimran may tentatively be identified with the Arabian town of *Zabram*, located between Mecca and Medina; Asshurim is referred to in a Minaen inscription from NW Arabia. Shuah is perhaps the one exception who may not have settled in Arabia, if his tribe is identified with the people of *Jasbuqu* in northern Mesopotamia.

7 According to Judg 1:16 Jethro was also a Kenite, so the Kenites may have been a sub-branch of the Midianites. Some of the Kenites (descendants of Jethro) joined Israel when they settled in the Promised Land, and seemed to have dwelt in the wilderness of Judah near Arad (Judg 1:16-17). Descendants of the Kenites included Heber, who separated from the rest of the Kenites and dwelt in the north at Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh (Judg 4:11) and whose wife Jael killed Sisera, general of Jabin king of Canaan (Judg 4:18-21). Another descendant of the Kenites was Rechab (1 Chr 2:55), who along with his cousin Baanah, apparently while inebriated killed king Ish-bosheth and were executed by David for this dastardly deed (2 Sam 4:2-12). Rechab's son Jonadab forbade his descendants to drink wine, and retreated back into the former nomadic life of his Kenite ancestors, part of the children of the East (Jer 35:6-19).

So far, in summary I have suggested that three groups are mentioned as being part of “the people of the East,” and that they settled in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula: the Joktan Arabians mainly in the south and SE, the Ishmaelite nomadic tribes mainly in the north, and the descendants of Keturah (e.g., Midianites) mostly in the central part of Arabia (Maalouf 2003:20, 21).⁸

Genesis 29:1: “So Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the East [*artsah bene qedem*].” This passage is the only one in the HB which has the fuller phrase “the land of the people of the East,” and not an abbreviated phrase “people of the East” or “land of the East” as elsewhere in the HB.

The earliest reference to the land of “Qedem [the east]” in ANE materials is found in the story of Sinuhe, ca. 20th century B.C. “The statement that Sinuhe reached the Land of Qedem after leaving Byblos and continued his wanderings from there to Upper Retenu indicates that the name Qedem here refers to a region on the western border of the Syrian desert” (Eph’al 1984:10). Israel Eph’al argues that Genesis 29:1 also refers to the Syrio-Arabian desert, through which Jacob passed through to reach Haran: “The name [Qedem] has the same meaning in the Bible [as in the Sinuhe story] in the description of Jacob’s journey to Haran, during which he crossed the Land of the People of the East” (Eph’al 1984:10).⁹ If this view is correct, then Jacob’s relatives may not be part of the “people of the East,” but Jacob traveled through the “land of the people of the East” to reach Haran.¹⁰

Alternatively, other scholars maintain that the term “sons of the East” (*bene qedem*) “may refer to Arameans along the northern Euphrates” and thus “the home of Nahor may be described as among *the Easterners*”; even though it is not in the Syro-Arabian desert, it is still east of the Euphra-

8 A comprehensive study of the fourteen major individual nomad groups named in Akkadian sources (and biblical references) is summarized alphabetically by Eph’al 1984:215-230, and it is remarkable to recognize that more than half can be identified with names of tribes descended from Ishmael of the sons of Keturah.

9 Eph’al further argues that “in other biblical references the term apparently lost its original meaning and was used generally to refer to the nomads in the desert regions east of Palestine.” This position is presented in conscious contrast with the view of J. A. Wilson and W. Helck, who consider the reference to “East” as “a vague term, either in the writer’s ignorance of Asiatic geography or intentionally vague for a wide nomadic area” (Pritchard 1969:19, note 10).

10 It is possible to interpret the Hebrew of Gen 29:1 this way. It reads literally, “Jacob lifted up his feet, and walked to [or through] the land of the people of the east.” Verse two then describes what he saw as he arrived at Haran, beyond the Syrio-Arabian desert.

tes (Hamilton 1995:252). If this view is correct, then this reference to the “land of the people of the East” broadens our perspective from the descendants of Hagar/Ishmael and Keturah, and Joktan’s descendants, mentioned above, to include a fourth major group which inhabited the “land of the East”—the Arameans, descended from Aram, the son of Shem. I favor the latter view, since the Aramaeans seemed to inhabit the entire region north of Palestine which now includes northern and NE Syria, and the Syrio-Arabian Desert, and Abraham’s relatives are clearly identified as Aramaeans. It is also possible that the two views may be reconciled, if the “land of the people of the East” specifically indicated the area in the Syrio-Arabian desert inhabited by nomadic peoples through which Jacob traveled on his way to Padan-Aram, and at the same time the people groups who inhabited this land were Aramaeans like Jacob’s kindred in Padan-Aram on the Tigris River (see discussion below).

The immediate context makes clear that Jacob was traveling from his home in Palestine to the land of his relatives in Haran (v. 4), specifically Laban his uncle (v. 13). A previous story involving Laban, in which Abraham’s servant came to find a wife for Isaac (Rebekah), indicates that the city in which Laban lived was Nahor (Gen 24:10), which was a separate settlement in the vicinity of Haran (cf. Gen 27:43, 28:10) “probably founded by Nahor [grandfather of Abraham] and named after him” (Horn 1979:775). Haran (and its satellite settlement Nahor) was located in Upper Mesopotamia (2 Kgs 19:12) on the Balikh River, one of the two main tributaries of the Euphrates River.

According to Gen 25:20, Laban was called “the Aramean,” his father was “Bethuel the Aramean,” and they lived in Paddan-aram. When Jacob is told by Isaac to go back to his relatives, it is to Paddan-Aram that he is directed to go (Gen 28:2). This is the name used throughout the Jacob narrative for the area where Jacob stayed for 20 years and later left to return to Canaan (Gen 28:5, 6, 7, 31:18, 33:18, 35:9, 26, 46:15). Paddan-Aram (probably meaning “route of Aram,” with Akkadian *padanu* meaning “road/route”) was “a country north [and east] of Palestine stretching from the Mediterranean eastward perhaps as far as the Habur River,” and the home of the Arameans” (Horn 1979:67). The Arameans were “descendants of Aram [a son of Shem, Gen 10:22, 23], Semites who probably originally came from the area inside the great bend of the Euphrates in northern Mesopotamia, the land called ‘Aram-Naharayim . . . (Gen 24:10) . . . ‘Aram of the Two Rivers’” (Horn 1979:67). The land of the Arameans eventually spread over a much larger area, including the territory north of Palestine from the Mediterranean Sea east at least to the Habur River (a tributary of the Tigris that rises in Turkey and flows through Iraq and joins the Tigris at the conjunction of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria). The Arameans were

“seminomadic pastoralists” (Freedman 1992: s.v. “Arameans”) and never formed large kingdoms but rather smaller city-states, with the strongest being Damascus (in modern Syria, mentioned in the time of David, 2 Sam 8:5, 6). Other Aramean city-states mentioned in the Bible are Aram of Beth-rehob (in northern Palestine, 2 Sam 10:6), Aram of Geshur (close to Bashan, Deut 3:14; 1 Chr 2:22, 23), Aram of Maacah (near Geshur, Deut 3:14; Josh 13:13), and Aram of Zobah (north of Damascus and the plain between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains, 1 Sam 14:47). When Tiglath Pileser III conquered Damascus in 732 BC he dispersed the inhabitants and made it an Assyrian province, but the Aramean language spread throughout the empire and became the international language of the empire (Horn 1979:67).

Job 1:1-3: “There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil. And seven sons and three daughters were born to him. Also, his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East [*bene qedem*].”

The introduction to the book of Job makes it clear that Job was one of the “children of the east” (*bene qedem*); in fact, he was the “greatest” of all these people of the East.

There is good evidence that the book of Job was written by Moses along with Genesis during his forty years in the Wilderness of Midian living with Jethro (see Nichols 1976-1980:3:493-496; White 1903:159; White 1880:1). “Job may have been a contemporary of Moses” (Nichol 1976-1980:3:494). He was not part of the Israelite line, but a true follower of God (Job 1:1) among “the people of the East” outside the covenant line of Isaac. The LXX adds an appendix at the end of the book of Job, which is stated to be a translation from (“the Syriac [Aramiac] book,” Job 42:17, LXX). This appendix adds further information about the identification and life-setting of Job. According to the LXX appendix, Job’s other name was Jobab (which appears in Gen 36:33), and he is a son of Zerah, son of Reuel, son of Esau (through Esau’s daughter born from his marriage with Basma the daughter of Ishmael). Thus Job (Jobab) was part Ishmaelite and part Edomite, the fifth generation from Abraham. The LXX appendix further indicates that Job married an Arabian wife. He lived in the land of Uz which was an oasis “on the borders of Idumea [Edom] and Arabia.” (Another tradition puts the land of Uz further north, south, and southeast of Damascus, while still another suggestion puts it in the area east and southeast of Amman.) (Maalouf 2003:124-126).

Although some have objected to the historicity of this LXX-Syriac (Aramaic) tradition, there is biblical evidence elsewhere that make it plausible, if not probable, at least in its general outline. Genesis 36 (the genealogy of Esau) indeed traces the line of Esau, and mentions Esau's wife Basemath, daughter of Ishmael (v. 3; cf. Gen 28:9), Reuel the son of Esau, and Basemath (v. 10), Zerah the son of Reuel (v. 13), and Jobab (Job?!) the son of Zerah (v. 33), fifth generation from Abraham. Genesis 36 also mentions other places/figures found in the book of Job, such as Uz (Gen 36:28; Job 1:1) and Eliphaz the Temanite (Gen 36:4, 10; Job 4:1, this Eliphaz was probably a grandson of the one mentioned in Gen 36:4). In Gen 36:33, Jobab is said to have been one of the "kings" (*melakim*) of Edom and in Job 29:25 Job says, "I chose a way for them and sat as chief [*ro'sh*], And dwelt as a king [*melek*] among the troops" (NASB). Thus Job likely was a descendant of Abraham (fifth in line from Abraham, to be more precise), of Edomite and Ishmaelite stock, and by marriage an Arabian-Edomite.

The book of Job portrays not only Job but his three friends (and Elihu) as monotheists, worshipers of the one true God, whom they call *El*, *Eloah*, *Elohim*, or *Shaddai* (names also used by the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) (see the discussion in Maalouf 2003:130-132). Several parallel passages make clear that the knowledge of the one true God *El* was common among the children of the East during the period of the patriarchs and the time of the Exodus (Deut 32:2; Judg 5:4; Hab 3:3, 7) (see discussion in Maalouf 2003:133-135).

If Job was a descendant of Ishmael and Esau, as suggested by the LXX and comparative evidence in Gen 36, then this book is a testimony to the monotheistic worship of the "people of the East" including various parts of the Syro-Arabian desert during the patriarchal period parallel to the time between Abraham and Moses.¹¹

Numbers 23:7: "And he [Balaam] took up his oracle and said: 'Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, From the mountains of the east [*harere qedem*]. "Come, curse Jacob for me, And come, denounce Israel!"'

This passage begins a series of four oracles delivered by the prophet Balaam (Num 22-24), who had been called by Balak to curse Israel but

11 Mention here can also be made of Caleb, whose father was Jephunneh, a Kenizzite. The ancestor of the Kenizzites was Kenaz, son of Eliphaz and grandson of Esau (Gen 36:11). Caleb joined up with the Hebrews who came out of Egypt, faithfully represented the tribe of Judah as one of the 12 spies (Num 13:6, 14:6-9, 24, 30), and at the ripe old age of 85 conquered Hebron (Josh 14:10-12, 15:13-14). Caleb is another example of one of Abraham's descendants not of the covenant line of Isaac who served the true God, and actually joined the Hebrew people.

ends up blessing them. According to this verse Balaam came from “Aram, from the mountains of the east.” This verse identifies Balaam as from among the Aramaeans, which as we have seen above, was a people group descended from Aram, the son of Shem, who originally came from the area of Northern Mesopotamia inside the great bend of the Euphrates River. Numbers 22:5 gives further information that Balaam lived “at Pethor, which is near the [Euphrates] River in the land of the people of Amaw” (ESV).¹² The Land of Amaw is mentioned occasionally in the cuneiform records, and was located west of the Euphrates River. In the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III, Pitru (the Hittite name for Pethor) is mentioned as being “on the other side of the Euphrates, on the river Sagur” (Pritchard 1969:278) which joined the Euphrates about 60 miles NE of Aleppo. Pethor is perhaps to be identified with Tell Akhmar, 18 miles south of Carchemish (Freedman 1992:5:288) in what is today NE Syria. The “mountains of the East” is “a Canaanite term for the mountainous region of eastern Syria” (Harrison 1990:309). Balaam is therefore describing the basic contours of the land of Aram, from the mountains of eastern Syria and north up to the Euphrates River, the latter of which was his own home. The “mountains of the East” thus comport with the expression “the land of the people of the East” in Gen 29:1, in describing the territory of the Arameans, in which lived Abraham’s brother Haran and his descendants.

This narrative gives indication that there were true people of God, including a true prophet of God, living among the “people of the East” in “the land of the East” Aram (Syria) at the time of the Exodus.

In the next sections I will display all the passages in Judges dealing with “the children of the East,” and then make comments on the various passages.

Judges 6:1-3: “Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains. So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East [*bene qedem*] would come up against them.”

Judges 6:33 (ESV): “Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East [*bene qedem*] came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.”

Judges 7:12 (ESV): “And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the

12 Some versions translate this Hebrew expression as “his people” rather than as a proper name. If this is the meaning, it may link Balaam with the relatives of Abraham in Aram, Paddan-aram to be more precise (see discussion above under Gen 29:1).

people of the East [*bene qedem*] lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance."

Judges 8:10 (ESV): "Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East [*bene qedem*], for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword."

All of the above passages in Judges refer to the same series of events, in which the Midianites, along with the Amalekites and the "people of the East," ravished the land of Israel every year at harvest time for a period of seven years (Judg 6:1), and Gideon led an army of 300 valiant soldiers which routed their armies (Judges 7 and 8). Some versions (such as the NKJV) and some commentators equate the Midianites and Amalekites with the people of the East in these passages ("the Midianites and the Amalekites, the children of the East," apparently taking the last *waw* as an exegetical "even"),¹³ but most versions (such as ESV) distinguish the three groups as separate.¹⁴ The NIV translates as "the Midianites, Amalekites, and other eastern peoples" (6:3, 33). Evidence that the Midianites and Amalekites were closely linked with, if not included in the designation "people of the East," comes from Judg 8:10, where Zebah and Zalmunna, specifically identified earlier as "kings of Midian" (8:5) are in v. 10 in charge of the army of "the people of the East." Daniel Block argues that *bene qedem* here "is not a proper name, nor a self-designation, but a vague gentilic label used by Westerners to denote the nomadic groups that migrated about the Arabian desert," involving various "Bedouin tribes" which "opportunistically joined the Midianites in a confederation of desert people and crossed the Jordan with them to pillage and generally wreak havoc on Israelite settlements" (1999:252). It is suggested that Judges 6 describes "a general movement of nomads caused by a lack of rain in their own districts" (252).¹⁵

Others take *bene qedem* as a proper name (see NJPS), translated as (people of the) Qedemites (or Kedemites), with Qedem (or Kedem) here "as a proper name designating the great Syrian Desert to the east of Moab and Ammon" (Nichol 1976-1980:2:341).

13 Hamilton 1995:252 suggests that "the expression is a summarizing ap-
positive for the Midianites and the Amalekites (not a distinct third group)."

14 See Block 1999:252, who upholds both possibilities: *bene qedem* "could
serve as an explanatory designation for Midian and Amalek since these must
have entered across the Jordan, or it could refer to another desert group."

15 See also Musil 1927:494-497 for an appendix on the *bene qedem*, in which
he equates the term with the Arabic *sherk*, one who marches through the region
of the inner desert of Arabia, that is, "those Arabs who raise camels and dwell
either constantly or at least half a year in the inner desert" (494).

A major study on the Midianites and relevant biblical passages by William Dumbrell (1970:1-183, 1975:323-337) concludes that the term “Midian” is used in the Judges narratives as a collective term for a large tribal confederation led by the descendants from Keturah (Gen 25:1-6), which included the Midianites, Amalekites, and the children of the East. This confederation controlled the areas surrounding including Transjordan, Edom, and Sinai. Dumbrell makes a good case for the fact that Gideon’s defeat of the Midianite confederacy started the decline of the Midianites as a dominant political power, and their decline gave rise to the ascendancy of the Ishmaelite tribes. In particular, the “sons of Qedar” (one of Ishmael’s sons) had predominance among the nomadic tribes of the northern Arabian Peninsula until late into the time of the Persian Empire, when the Nabateans (descendants of Nebaioth, another son of Ishmael? see discussion below) gained ascendancy over northern Arabia.

1 Kings 4:30-31 (ESV; Hebrews 5:10-11): “Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east [*bene qedem*] and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations.”

These two verses come in a section of 1 Kings describing the wisdom of Solomon (1 Kgs 4:29-34. Verse 29 indicates the source of Solomon’s wisdom was from God, and describes his “exceeding great understanding and largeness of heart like the sand on the sea shore.” Verses 32-33 delineate the scope of Solomon’s wisdom (3,000 proverbs, 1,005 songs, and knowledge of the flora and fauna of nature), and v. 34 informs that “men of all nations, from the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom,” came to hear his wisdom. In vv. 30-31, our present passage, the author compares Solomon’s wisdom with that of others within wisdom circles in Israel and beyond, especially in Egypt and among the “children of the East.”

Verse 31 (Heb 5:11) highlights the wisdom figures in Israel. Heman and Ethan, Chalcol, and Darda, may have been four of five brothers from the tribe of Judah, sons of Zerah (also spelled Ezra), grandsons of Tamar, Judah’s daughter-in law (1 Chr 2:6). Heman and Ethan wrote Psalm 89 and 88 respectively (cf. Ps 88:1 and 89:1).¹⁶ Alternatively (but less likely) Heman and Ethan here may refer to two of Israel’s great musicians from the tribe of Levi who were singers and instrumentalist choir leaders of the Levitical antiphonal choirs (1 Chr 15:17, 19; cf. 6:33, 44, 16:41-42, 25:1, 4, 5, 6; 2 Chr 5:2, 35:15).

¹⁶ See also 1 Chr 25:5, which mentions a “Heman” as “the king’s seer in the words of God.”

In the narratives about or writings of Solomon are there representatives or samples of the wisdom of Egypt and the wisdom of the “children of the East” to which Solomon is compared? Scholars have long recognized that Proverbs 22:17-24:22 is intertextually linked with the Egyptian Instructions of Amenemope, who lived ca. 1200 B.C.¹⁷ More recently, a number of studies argue that the sayings of Agur and Lemuel recorded in Prov 30-31 provide samples of wisdom literature from the “people of the East” in Arabia. The majority of scholars today concur that the word *mas-sa’* in Prov 30:1 and 31:1 should not be translated as “oracle” but rather is a proper name, Massa, referring to the kingdom of Massa.¹⁸ Hence Prov 30:1 should read, “The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh, of Massa. Prophecy of this man for Ithiel” (NJB; cf. RSV, JB, NEB). Similarly, Prov 31:1 should read: “The sayings of Lemuel king of Massa, taught him by his mother” (NJB). “Massa is not an unidentified kingdom; in fact, he is one of the children of Ishmael (Gen 2. 25:12-18), and his kingdom is the ^{URU}*Maas-’a-a-a* that Tiglath Pileser received tribute from around 735 B.C. (Pritchard 1969:283), which was probably referred to by Ptolemy as the *Masanoi* of the Arabian Desert (Ptolemy, Geography 5.18.2), and Winnett locates somewhere between *Tayma’* and *al-Jawf’* (ARNA, 90, 101, cited in Maalouf 2003:290). If this analysis is correct, then the “children of the East” are linked with the descendants of Ishmael in the time of Solomon, as carrying on the wisdom tradition, and producing Ishmaelite wise persons (including a woman, who instructed her son King Lemuel) in the Arabian Peninsula whose writings are inspired by God and included in the biblical canon.

Isaiah 11:14: “But they shall fly down upon the shoulder of the Philistines toward the west; Together they shall plunder the people of the East [*bene qedem*]; They shall lay their hand on Edom and Moab; And the people of Ammon shall obey them.”

Isaiah 11 comes toward the conclusion of the Volume of Immanuel (Isa 7-12), and describes the coming of the Messianic Davidic King (vv. 1-5), the Messianic age of peace and the influx of believing Gentiles (vv. 6-10), and the promised return of the scattered remnant of God’s people to their land and victory over their enemies (vv. 11-16). Verse 11 lists the areas from which the remnant of Israel will return: “from Assyria [north, Mesopotamia] and Egypt, from Pathros and Cush [all from the south], from Elam and Shinar [northeast, Mesopotamia], from Hamath [north, Syria] and the islands of the sea [west].” Verse 12 summarizes that these “outcasts of Israel” and “dispersed of Judah” come “from the four corners of

17 For a convenient summary of the major literature dealing with this intertextual parallel, see Maalouf 2008:282-283.

18 See, for example Day 1995:55-70. For a summary of the evidence supporting this conclusion, see Maalouf 2003:138-143.

the earth." In passing we note that the term "East" is not used to describe the various nations of this list from Mesopotamia (Assyria, Elam, Shinar).

Verse 13 indicates that Israel and Judah will at that time be in harmony with each other: Ephraim will not envy Judah and Judah will not harass Ephraim. Verse 14 describes how together Israel and Judah will recover their former territory and influence (hegemony) to the west and to the east. To the west, "they shall swoop down [imagery of a bird of prey] on the shoulder of the Philistines [the Shephelah or hill country bordering Israel and Philistia]" (ESV). This was the territory formerly controlled by the Israelites in the time of the United Monarchy under David and Solomon.

Now comes the reference to the "children of the East": "together they shall plunder the people of the East [*bene Qedem*]. They shall lay their hand on Edom and Moab; And the people of Ammon shall obey them." Even though some commentators equate the "people of the East" with the nations of Edom, Moab, and Ammon,¹⁹ the context and specific use of wording seems to point toward the conclusion that these "the children of the East" are to be considered separately from Edom, Moab, and Ammon (see e.g., Young 1965:399). Isaiah predicts that "together [i.e., both Judah and Israel] shall plunder [Heb. *bazaz*, 'to plunder, take as spoil'] the children of the East [*bene Qedem*]." This language parallels the language used in Judg 6:1-6, where in the time of Gideon the people of the East (connected with or including the Midianites and Amalakites) came in to the fields of Israel at harvest time and "spoiled, ruined" (Heb. *shakhat*) the harvest (Judg 6:3-5). As the "people of the East" had spoiled/ruined their crops in times past, so Israel and Judah would take as spoil (plunder) their possessions. This is to be distinguished from what Israel and Judah would do to Edom and Moab: they would "lay their hand on" these peoples. The NJPS translates thus: "Edom and Moab shall be subject to them." The idea here is control over, a hegemony with regard to these peoples, which is not the case for the "children of the East." Likewise, "the people of Ammon shall obey them." The NASB translates this as a parallel thought with the previous line: "the sons of Ammon will be subject to them." In contrast to treatment of Israel and Judah toward the people of the East—*lex talionis* or retributive justice in plundering their possessions as people of the East had done to them but not putting them in subjection to their power—the combined nations of Judah and Israel would subject Edom, Moab, and Ammon to their hegemony as in the days of Solomon when these nations paid tribute to Israel.

¹⁹ This seems implied, e.g., by Oswalt 1986:288 who does not even mention "the children of the East" but apparently subsumes them under the reference to the three eastern neighbors of Israel.

Thus the reference to “the people of the East” in this passage are likely to the same people groups encountered in previous passages: the nomadic desert-dwellers of the Arabian Peninsula (including especially the Syro-Arabian Desert).

Jeremiah 49:28-29: Concerning Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon struck down. Thus says the LORD: “Rise up, advance against Kedar! Destroy the people of the east [*bene qedem*]! Their tents and their flocks shall be taken, their curtains and all their goods; their camels shall be led away from them, and men shall cry to them: ‘Terror on every side!’” (ESV).

This passage comes in the midst of a series of judgment oracles delivered by Jeremiah against the various nations/peoples of the ancient world surrounding Israel (Jer 46-51; including Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Damascus, Kedar [the “people of the East”] and Hazor, Elam, Babylon, and Babylonia). Kedar, along with “the kingdoms of Hazor” (an unidentified location in the Arabian Desert (Horn 1979:466)²⁰ are singled out as subjects of the attack and destruction at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Dec 599 B.C.) (see discussion in Maalouf 2003:165-167). In Jer 49:28, the reference to “Kedar” is placed in synonymous poetic parallelism with “the people of the East [*bene qedem*],” thus making evident that these are to be considered as synonymous (or at least overlapping in identity); that is, Kedar was one of the nomadic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula that was known as part of “the people of the East.”

Kedar was one of the sons of Ishmael (Gen 25:13; 1 Chr 1:29), whose descendants became the frequently-mentioned nomadic tribe that roamed in the Syro-Arabian desert from southern Palestine northward to Lower Mesopotamia (see Horn 1979:639 and map XI). They seem to have been the dominant tribe in this area especially during the time of the Assyrian Empire (7th century B.C.).²¹ The cuneiform records mention this tribe under the names *Qidri*, *Qadri*, and *Qidarri*, and an Aramaic inscription of the 5th century B.C. refers to the tribe as *Qdr* (Horn 1979:639). According to Jeremiah’s prophecy in Jer 49:28-29, the tribe was known for its many flocks (of sheep and goats) and camels (cf. Ezek 27:21), and other passages describe Kedar as famous for its skilled archers (Isa 21:16, 17). In Solomon’s Song of Songs 1:5, Shulamit compares her own “dark but beautiful” skin complexion to “the tents of Kedar.”

In the passage of Jer 49:28-29, Kedar is the focus of an oracle of judgment in connection with devastation at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar,

20 Not to be confused with other places in Scripture named “Hazor.”

21 Horn 1979:639, Map XI shows only this tribe of Kedar in this area of the Syro-Arabian Desert during the time of the Assyrian Empire (7th century B.C.).

king of Babylon (Dec, 599 B.C.; see discussion below). In a parallel section of oracles against the foreign nations, in Isaiah 13-23, Kedar is likewise mentioned in the context of negative judgment (Isa 21:16-17), which probably was fulfilled in Sargon II's conquest of northern Arabia (Maalouf 2003:164). However, other passages describe Kedar in positive terms. They are summoned as witnesses in the divine covenant lawsuit (*rib*) against Judah in Jer 2:10. Kedar is also mentioned in connection with the coming Messianic Age. Isaiah 42:11, in the context of the coming "Servant of the Lord," predicts that the nations surrounding Israel will rejoice, including the inhabitants of the Syro-Arabian desert east of Israel: "Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the top of the mountains" (ESV).

Again in Isa 60:4 in the context of the Gentiles coming to the light of Mt. Zion in the Messianic age (v. 3), there is the prediction of the wealth of the Gentiles (v. 4) coming to Zion, and the animals of the nomadic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula (including those of Kedar) bringing gifts and in praise of Yahweh (vv. 5-6, ESV): "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house." In the latter passage, Kedar is mentioned in parallel with the nomadic tribe of Nebaioth, descendants of the first-born son of Ishmael (Gen 25:13). Also mentioned in this latter passage are other nomadic tribes, descended from Abraham, who are included in the "people of the East" of the Syro-Arabian Desert: Midian (son of Abraham through Keturah, mentioned above); Ephah (son of Midian, Gen 25:4; 1 Chr 1:32, 33), Sheba (son of Jokshan, who was son of Abraham through Keturah, Gen 25:2-3; 1 Chr 1:32; probably not Sheba, son of Joktan, great-great grandson of Shem, mentioned above). Maalouf provides a thought-provoking perspective on these Messianic prophecies of the ingathering of the Gentiles, highlighting the children of the East:

As circumcised children of Abraham, the Arabian tribes mentioned in Scripture passages quoted above come first among the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation of the nations. Their privilege as physical descendants of Abraham necessitates a theological priority in judgment and visitation. It seems that Paul caught this sequential priority of Arabs in God's plan for restoration of the Gentiles and went first to Arabia in response to his calling to preach among the nations. (2003:186)

Ezekiel 25:3-4 (ESV): “Say to the Ammonites, Hear the word of the Lord GOD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Because you said, ‘Aha!’ over my sanctuary when it was profaned, and over the land of Israel when it was made desolate, and over the house of Judah when they went into exile, therefore behold, I am handing you over to the people of the East [*bene qedem*] for a possession, and they shall set their encampments among you and make their dwellings in your midst. They shall eat your fruit, and they shall drink your milk.”

This passage occurs among Ezekiel’s oracles against the foreign nations (Ezek 25-32), and specifically addressed the people of the Ammonites. The Ammonites, like the people of Edom (see Ps 137:7), gloated over Judah when its temple was destroyed by Babylon, and God’s predicted judgment is that their people and territory is to be given over “as a possession [Heb. *morashah*] to the people of the East [*bene qedem*]” (Ezek 25:4, ESV). In other words, the nomadic tribes, descended from Ishmael, who inhabited the Syro-Arabian Desert east of the land of Ammon, would encroach upon the land of the Ammonites and essentially take it over as their possession. The prophecy continues by predicting that the nation of Ammon would eventually be “cut off from the nations” by God and “perish from the countries” (v. 7), and thus their territory would be completely taken over by the people of the East.

Ezekiel 25:8-10 (ESV): “Thus says the Lord GOD: Because Moab and Seir said, ‘Behold, the house of Judah is like all the other nations,’ therefore I will lay open the flank of Moab from the cities, from its cities on its frontier, the glory of the country, Beth-jeshimoth, Baal-meon, and Kiriathaim. I will give it along with the Ammonites to the people of the East [*bene qedem*] as a possession, that the Ammonites may be remembered no more among the nations.” The setting of this passage is the same as the previous one, except the nation being called into judgment is Moab, Ammon’s southern neighbor in Transjordan. Evidently Moab engaged in the same gloating over the destruction of Jerusalem’s temple as did Ammon (to its north) and Edom (to its south), and the same sentence is pronounced against them as against Ammon: “I will give it along with the Ammonites to the people of the East [*bene qedem*] as a possession [Heb. *moreshah*]” (v. 10). In succeeding verses the desolation of Edom is likewise predicted (vv. 12-14), but their destruction is stated as taking place “by the hand of My people Israel” instead of being taken over by the children of the East.

These passages in Ezek 25 indicate that despite the divine judgment predicted in previous passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah (see above), “God’s judgment on the Arabian nomadic tribes was for the sake of discipline rather than complete neutralization” (Maalouf 2003:167). These tribes were to be given possession of the lands of Moab and Ammon.

References to Deliverance Coming from the East (e.g., Isa 41:2, 25, 46:11; Rev 16:12)

Several biblical references speak of deliverance coming from the east. The passages in Isaiah under consideration all predict the coming of Cyrus, king of Persia, who would deliver Israel from its captivity in Babylon (cf. Isa 44:28, 45:1; 2 Chr 36:22, 23; Ezra 1:1-4, 5:13-15, 6:3-5). The term used to refer to the “east” in these passages is *mizrakh*, “lit. place of sunrise,” not *qedem* as in the passages referring to the children of the East. *Qedem* is never used as a geographical location with regard to Persia or Babylon, but is a “technical term referring to the Syro-Arabian Desert” (Maalouf 2003:207). Furthermore, the context makes clear that “east/sun-rising” is used in these passages as a direction viewed from the reference-point of Babylon, since Cyrus will come from the east of Babylon, the location of Persia with reference to Babylon. The mention of the drying up of the River Euphrates, to make way for “the kings from the East” in Rev 16:12 is alluding to this OT event where Cyrus diverted the Euphrates river so that his troops could enter Babylon through the dry riverbed and conquer the city. From the perspective of Palestinian Jews, armies/kings coming from Assyria, Babylon, or Persia are never said to be coming from the east. The route for those armies to arrive in Palestine was from the north, not the east, and enemy armies are often said to be coming from the north (see e.g., Isa 14:31; Jer 1:13-15, 4:6, 6:1, 22, 10:22, 13:20, 25:9, 46:20, 24, 47:2, 50:3, 9, 41; Ezek 26:7; Zeph 2:3). Thus these passages regarding the “sun-rising/east” (*mizrakh*) are not relevant for our study of the children of the East.

The Story of the “Wise Men from the East” (Matt 2:1) Coming to Bring Gifts to Baby Jesus

There has been debate over the origin of the Magi who came to worship the new-born King from the East. After surveying the various options, Maalouf presents an array of evidence—from geography, from the gifts of the Magi (incense and “gold of Arabia,” Isa 60:5; Ps 72:15), from biblical typology (Isa 60:6)— to support the conclusion that the Magi did not come from Persia, but from Arabia (i.e., from among the children of the East), in fulfillment of Bible prophecy (2003:193-217).

Summary and Implications

The first people groups connected with the East in the Bible after the Flood are the nomadic tribes descended from the thirteen sons of Joktan, Shem’s great-great grandson, who included Almodad, Sheleph,

Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab (Gen 10:26-29). These tribes dwelt “from Mesha as you go toward Sephar, the mountain of the east” (Gen 10:30), that is, mostly in the southern and SE part of the Arabian Peninsula.

A second set of nomadic tribes connected with the “land of the East” were the descendants of Abraham through Hagar and her son Ishmael, who were directed by Abraham to go “eastward, to the land of the East” (Gen 25:6). The twelve sons of Ishmael (Gen 25:13-15) included, in order of birth, Nebaioth, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah, and the twelve tribes descended from these sons dwelt “from Havilah, by Shur, which is close to Egypt, all the way to Asshur” (Gen 25:18), that is, mostly in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula. The Ishmaelites (in general), and various tribes descended from Ishmael, are directly described as part of the “children of the East.”

A third set of people groups connected with the land of the East were descendants of the six sons of Abraham by his wife Keturah after Sarah died (Gen 25:1), which included Zimran, Kokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah (Gen 25:1, 20). The nomadic tribes bearing these names dwelt mostly in the central part of Arabia. The tribe descended from Keturah mentioned most often in the biblical text is Midian, whose dwelling ranged from the southern part of the peninsula of Sinai northward to the Gulf of Aqabah and as far as the plains east of Moab. The Midianites early-on intermingled through marriage (and profession) with the Ishmaelites, descendants of Ishmael, Abraham’s son through Hagar. The Midianites are intricately connected with (included in) the term “people of the East.”

A fourth group that may be connected with the “the land of the people of the East” are the Arameans, descended from Aram, the son of Shem, from which Abraham and his relatives’s people group came in Haran/Paddan-Aram (depending on the translation of Gen 29:1), who dwelt in the Syrio-Arabian Desert (and possibly in Northern Mesopotamia).

Thus, four groups are mentioned as being part of “the people of the East,” which settled in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula: the Joktan tribes mainly in the south and SE, the Ishmaelite nomadic tribes mainly in the north, the descendants of Keturah (especially the Midianites) mostly in the central part of Arabia, and the Arameans, who dwelt in the Syrio-Arabian Desert (and perhaps Northern Mesopotamia).

The term “people of the East” is not used to describe the inhabitants of Lower Mesopotamia, including Assyria, Babylonia, and (later) Persia, but is focused upon the nomadic tribes in the desert areas of the Arabian Peninsula.

Are the “Children of the East” Arabs and What Happened to Them?

After displaying all the biblical references to nomads in the regions surrounding Palestine and in the desert regions to the east and south, Israel Eph'al points out a striking conclusion that there is a significant change in terminology for these nomads in the Bible around the mid-tenth century B.C., with only one term staying constant: “the people of the East” (1984:60-63).

[I]n the historical and literary parts of the Bible there are radical changes in the names of the nomad groups, the turning-point occurring in the mid-tenth century B.C.: thereafter Hagarites, Ishmaelites, Midianites and Amalekites do not appear (nor, it should be noted, do they figure in extra-biblical sources, either of the period of this study or prior to it). Instead, the collective noun “Arab(s)” begins to be used, and various groups (Buz, Dedan, Dumah, ‘Ephah, Massa’, Nebaioth, Qedar, Sheba, and Tema’) not in the sources for the earlier period are referred to. Only the designation “People of the East” [*bene qedem*] spans both periods. (Eph'al 1984:63)

Eph'al writes from a critical perspective, in which he does not accept the genealogical ancestries of the Bible as historical, but if one takes the genealogies of Genesis seriously, then the “turning point” in terminology around the time of the rise of the Divided Monarchy makes good sense. Before the rise of the Monarchy in Israel, the older designations of “Hagarites” and “Ishmaelites” and “Midianites” reflected a period after the time of Abraham when these groups were seen collectively as the descendants of their primary progenitors, Hagar/Ishmael and Keturah (and her sons Midian and Jokshan), whereas later in history the focus shifted to the individual tribes which descended from Ishmael's sons (esp. Dumah, Massa, Nebaioth, Qedar, and Tema') and the sons of Keturah's sons Midian (Ephah, Gen 25:4) and Jokshan (Dedan and Sheba, Gen 25:3). In fact, it is remarkable that in the Bible “all the nomad groups known as ‘Arabs’ and mentioned in the genealogical lists appear in the lists of the Sons of Qeturah [Keturah] and Sons of Ishmael” (Eph'al 1984:231).²² Throughout all these centuries, the term “Children of the East” accurately described these nomadic peoples of the Arabian Peninsula, identify them as either sons of Keturah or sons of Ishmael, and as Arabs.

22 The term “Amalekites” (descendants of Amalek, son of Esau's son Eliphaz, Gen 36:12, 13) ceases to be used after the Monarchy because the Amalekites were wiped out by King Saul (1 Sam 15:1-8) in fulfillment of the divine command in Exod 17:14.

Etymologically, the term “Arab” refers to “nomadic desert dwellers without allusion to ethnic descent or nationality” (see Eph’al 1984:6-10). The first unambiguous occurrence of the term “Arab” outside the Bible is in an Assyrian text describing the battle of Qarqar (853 B.C.), which lists Shalmaneser III’s adversaries in the battle, and includes not only Ahab the Israelite, but also mentions “Gindibu [Arabic *Jundub*] the Arabian” and his “1000 camels” (Luckenbill 1926-1927: par. 611 cited in Maalouf 2003:261, note 8). From its earliest mention, the Arabians are linked to desert life by the reference to camels. References to “Arabs” occur numerous times in the Assyrian royal records, sometimes as allies and sometimes as enemies of Assyrians (for discussion and examples see Eph’al 1984: 5-12, 62-64, 237-240). These “Arabs” in Assyrian records mostly deal with the nomadic desert dwellers in north and central Arabia, but the name also referred to nomadic tribes from the Sinai Peninsula and the Syro-Arabian Desert. Other ancient records besides those of the Assyrians, dating from the 9th century and onward at opposite ends of the Fertile Crescent and apparently independent of each other, refer to “Arabs” in Greek, South Arabic, and Classical Arabic.²³ This gives indication that the term “Arab” “was the designation that the nomads applied to themselves” (7). Eph’al notes that no satisfactory etymology has yet been found, and that the Hebrew *‘arabah* (one of the words for desert) is probably not the etymological basis of the word, since it is not found in Arabic or in Akkadian (7). As mentioned in the discussion above, the descendants of Ishmael (the various tribes bearing the name of Ishmael’s sons) comprised a prominent part of this group of “Arabs” and assumed leadership roles.

During the time of the Divided Monarchy and after, the Bible explicitly uses the term “Arab” or “Arabian” (Heb. *‘arabi*) to refer to the nomadic desert dwellers in general: that is, Isa 31:20 (“no Arab [*‘arabi*] will pitch his tent there”), and Jer 3:2 (“like an Arab [*‘arabi*] in the wilderness”). Several OT passages refer to “Arabia” (Heb. *‘arab*): 1 Kgs 10:15; 2 Chr 9:14; Isa 21:13; Jer 25:24; Ezek 27:21; cf. in the NT Gal 1:17, 4:25. Isaiah, as part of his “oracles against the nations,” delivers an “oracle concerning Arabia [*‘arab*]” in Isa 21:13-17. In the oracles that follow, Isaiah specifically mentions Dedan (v. 13), which was one of the tribes descended from Jokshan, son of Keturah (Gen 25:3), and Tema (v. 14), which was a tribe descended from Ishmael’s son Tema, as well as Kedar (vv. 16-17), which as noted above was another son of Ishmael. Hence, the inhabitants of “Arabia” clearly included descendants of Hagar/Ishmael and Keturah.

23 The term, however, does not seem to be used by the nomads in southern Arabia until at least the 3rd cent B.C. (See Eph’al 1984:8-9).

Another passage making this point clear is Jer 25:24. Jeremiah summarizes the coming divine judgment upon the various nations in Jer 25:17-26, which was probably fulfilled by the attack of Nebuchadnezzar in Dec 599 (Maalouf 2003:167). What is very instructive is that among those whom he prophesizes against are “all the kings of the Arabs” (v. 24), and the previous verse singles out representative tribes of that group: “Dedan, Tema, and Buz. As we have seen above, Dedan was the son of Joskhan son of Keturah (Gen 25:3) and Tema was a son of Ishmael. Buz was a son of Abraham’s brother Nahor (Gen 22:20, 21), ancestor of an Aramaen tribe. Thus in this list we have representatives from the major groups of “Arabs” who were relatives of Abraham and also called “children of the East”: descendants of Keturah (Abraham’s wife), of Ishmael (Abraham’s son), and of Nahor (Abraham’s nephew). Thus the term “children of the East” refers primarily to “north Arabian nomadic tribes” of which the descendants of Ishmael comprised a major part.

In the time of Assyria, the Arabian nomads in Northern Arabia were subdued by Tiglath Pileser III (745-727 B.C.), crushed by Sargon II (722-705 B.C.), ruled by Sennacherib V (704-681), harassed by Esarhaddon (680-669 B.C.), and devastated by Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.).²⁴ Under the Babylonians, the “Qedarites” (note the term alludes to Qedar, one of the sons of Ishmael; the Ishmaelite hegemony over the Arab tribes seems implied in the terminology) were attacked by Nebuchadnezzar in December 599 B.C., and may be seen as “heaven’s decree as a discipline on the circumcised (Gen. 17:22-25; Jer. 9:25-26) children of the East because of their deep slide into idolatry (Jer. 2:10-11)” (Maalouf 2003:165, 166). Nabonidus (555-539 B.C.) conquered the city of Tayma’ (Tema) around the year 552 B.C., and established it as his royal residence. He also established colonies in the major trade stations, along the oases, located from north to south on the incense road in the district of Hejaz, thus controlling the internal trade route through northern Arabia.²⁵ When Persia conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., the Persian Empire established peace with the Arabs, and the Arabs were one of the few people upon whom tribute was not laid (Maalouf 2003:169).

In post-Exilic times during the Persian Empire the term “Arabia designates the (partly Edomite) province of ‘Arabia’ (cf. Neh 2:19), which, like Judea and Samaria, formed part of the Persian satrapy of *Abar Nahara*,

24 See details in Eph’al 1984:81-169; summarized in Maalouf 2003:158-164. The headings of Maalouf’s sections are utilized in my summary.

25 For the history of the Arabs during the Babylonian Empire, see Eph’al 1984:170-191 and Maalouf 2003:165-169).

‘Beyond the River’” (Horn 1979:65).²⁶ The Qedamites (not to be confused with the Qedemites “Easterners”) or north Arabian descendants of Ishmael, continued to survive through the centuries as one empire gave way to another.

After the reference to northern Arabian by the Greek historian Xenophon, when he traversed the Euphrates region in 401 B.C. there is no mention in the surviving recorded history till 312 B.C. when (as described by Diodorus) the Nabatean Arabs successfully withstood an attack by Antigonos the One-Eyed, one of the generals of Alexander the Great (312 B.C.). It seems that during that “silent period” the Nabateans took the stage as the representatives of the Northern Arabian nomads, and their empire stretched across northern Arabia. With the shrinking of Edom after it assisted Nebuchadnezzar in the sacking of Jerusalem (Jer 49:7-22; Ezek 25:12-15; Obad 1-9; Mal 1:2-4), the Nabateans gradually moved into Mt. Seir with Petra as a capital, and then spread their territory throughout the Negev and Transjordan.

Meanwhile, in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula (in the vicinity of modern Yemen), the highly civilized and wealthy Sabaeen (Sheba) kingdom thrived and monopolized the spice trade of frankincense and myrrh for centuries, probably from the days of Solomon (Queen of Sheba, 1 Kgs 10:1-3) until they were replaced in 115 B.C. by the Himyarite dynasty. This dynasty was succeeded by the Ethiopians (early sixth century A.D.), and Sassanid Persians (A.D. 575).

The historical records from classical sources use the term “Arab(s)” in line with what we have seen earlier, that is, as a designation of nomadic peoples living between Egypt and the region of the Euphrates, and does not indicate a unified political-administrative entity (Eph’al 1984:192, 193).

The “Arabians” mentioned as being at Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost (Acts 2:11) “were probably Jews or proselytes who lived in the Nabatean kingdom of Aretas, which extended along the east and south of Palestine” (193). The Arabia in which Paul spent three years after his conversion was also probably “this same Nabatean kingdom, of which Petra was the capital” (193; see also Hengel and Schwemer 1997:106-126). Arabia in the first century also included the Sinai Peninsula, and thus Paul could speak of “Mt. Sinai in Arabia” (Gal 4:25).

Regarding the identity of the Nabataeans, the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily (1st century B.C.) links them with the Ishmaelite northern Arabian tribes that were not subdued by either the Assyrians, Medo-Persians, or

26 See also Neh 6:1-6, which mentions Geshem, probably ruler of Dedan, “an Arabic people who displaced the Edomites in the 5th cent. B.C.” (Horn 1979:65). Note that Dedan was descended from Jokshan son of Keturah, Abraham’s wife after Sarah died (Gen 25:3).

Macedonians (Diodorus 2.48.4-5, cited in Maalouf 2003:173). Thus he sees a continuity with the Assyro-Babylonian Arab tribes (discussed above) and the Nabataeans. Most modern scholars concur that the Nabateans were not of Aramaic stock but consisted of “a north Arabian tribe heavily influenced by Aramaic culture (172).”²⁷ The study of Nabatean religion supports this, since their principles gods were north Arabian deities (*Dushara, 'Allat, Manot, el-'Uzza, and Hobal*), plus the Aramaic god from northern Syria, *Ba'l Shamin* “lord of the heavens” Appel 2011:174). It appears that the Nabateans, although polytheistic, did not allow graven images among them, like in urban polytheistic societies, and this “may be an indication of a dormant monotheism lying in the background of their polytheistic rituals (Maalouf 2003:175). The second-century B.C. book of Jubilees states the following about the non-Israelite children of Abraham and their connection with the term Arab:

And he [Abraham] gave to Ishmael and to his sons, and to the sons of Keturah, gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son, and he gave everything to Isaac his son. And Ishmael and his sons, the sons of Keturah and their sons, went together and dwelt from Paran to the entering of Babylon in all the land which is towards the East facing the desert. And these mingle with each other, and their name was called Arabs, and Ishmaelites. (Jubilees 20:11-13)

This Jewish tradition seems to indicate that the terms “Arab” and “Ishmaelites” became synonymous. The intermarriages among the various tribes descended from Hagar and Keturah eventually tied together these tribes ethnically, and those not linked ethnically were labelled “Ishmaelite” by reason of geographical and cultural associations. Thus the historian Josephus could list all the names of the Ishmaelite tribes, and conclude that “these inhabited all the country from Euphrates to the Red Sea, and called it Nabatene. They are an Arabian nation and name their tribes from these, because of their own virtue and because of the dignity of Abraham their father” (Josephus, *Ant.* 1.12.4). It appears that “the Ishmaelite element in

27 See the linguistic, historical, religious, and social life arguments summarized in Maalouf 2003:172-176. Another theory is that the Nabateans descended from the Rechabites, a sub-tribe of the Midianites, after the destruction of Jerusalem when Jaazaniah leads the Rechabites back into the wilderness (2 Kgs 25:23-26), and they gradually replace the Edomites who move into the power vacuum left in Judah by the Babylonian captivity (see Appel 2011:83 who also argues that the word “Nabatean” is Arabic for “Aramean” and aptly fits the Rechabites who were an Arabic tribe but spoke Aramean from their stay in Israel. Unfortunately Appel gives no secondary sources to support his claims.

north Arabia was so prominent that it became with time representative of north Arabians in general" Maalouf 2003:176). Martin Hengel and Anna Schwemer summarize the first-century Jewish view regarding Arabs and their identification with the descendants of Ishmael.

The Jews regarded the 'Arabs', embodied by what was then politically the most powerful Arab people in the immediate environment of Eretz Israel, the Nabataeans, as descendants of Ishmael the son of Abraham, i.e., as kindred tribes. Another more closely related people, the Idumeans and 'descendants of Esau', had been converted to Judaism by John Hyrcanus I (135/4–104 BCE). So the Arab Nabataeans appeared to be the closest 'kinsfolk' of the Jews who were still Gentiles. . . . [T]he Nabataean Arabs remained not only the closest kinsfolk but also geographically the nearest and most important 'neighbours' of Israel, to whom the threat and promise of Jer. 12.14-17 to 'my neighbours' applied, namely that they were 'to learn the ways of my people'. . . . Presumably Paul, as on his later missionary journeys, visited the synagogues in the larger cities during his stay of about two years, above all in the capital Petra. (1997:110, 111, 113)

Thus the continuity between the descendants of Ishmael in the OT and the "Arabians" of the NT "Arabia" is maintained in history and in the consciousness of the Jewish people of the first century A.D.²⁸ There was a strong Jewish presence in Arabia, and many Arab-Jewish contacts. Herod the Great was half-Nabataean and half-Idumean, but also a Jew by conversion of his ancestors on Antipater's side. He had an "Arabian bodyguard." It was normal to find Arabian Jews and Jewish Arabs present in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2:10-11). There was indeed a remnant of monotheistic believers among the Arabs in the first century seeking God and awaiting the coming of the Messiah.

A Roman expedition against Arabia took place under Aelius Gallus (24-25 A.D.) was a failure in breaking the commercial monopoly of southern Arabia, so Rome broke the trade monopoly by reviving access to the Red Sea (by replacing the Ptolemies in Egypt) and thence to India via the Nile. This in turn weakened the Nabatean economy and Syrian gover-

28 It is tempting to equate the name "Nabatean" with the son of Ishmael, Nabaioth, and scholars of the past have made this connection. But the consensus of scholarship is that the two should not be equated, since the "t" in the word "Nabatean" is a *tet*, while the "t" in Nabaioth is a *tau*. However, the study by E. C. Broome, "Nabaiati, Nebaioth and the Nabataeans: The Linguistic Problem," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 18 (Spring 1973): 1-16, suggests a possible solution to the linguistic problem that does allow Nabaioth to be the etymological derivation of the word Nabataen, thus linking the Nabateans to the stock of Ishmael. The verdict is still out on this question.

nor Cornelius Palma annexed Nabatea to Rome in A.D. 106. Various small kingdoms continued to thrive in northern Arabia during pre-Islamic times, including the Palmyrenes (with their caravan city Palmyra NE of Damascus, who produced a Roman emperor “Philip the Arab” (A.D. 224-249) the Ghassanids (descendants of a S Arabic tribe, vassal of Byzantium, adopted Monophysitism as the official religion), and the Lakhmids (vassal of Persia, which adopted Nestorianism). The suzerain states of Byzantium and Persia mistreated these kingdoms, and in the midst of social and religious disorder they were ready for a change on the eve of the birth of Islam, particularly if it came from within Arabia. Enter Mohammed, who at the age of 40, began to call the Arab people back to the one God *Allah*, the God of Abraham, and of their nomadic ancestors through Abraham.

Relationship between the “Children of the East” (Arabs) and Islam

Several studies of pre-Islamic monotheism have concluded that the monotheistic groups referred to by the Qur’an as *hanifs* (*hunafa*), who were independent from the organized religions of Judaism and Christianity, “continued a monotheistic tradition that went back to Abraham’s time.”²⁹ Montgomery summarizes:

Mohammad had the advantage in building upon Jewish and Christian foundations, but it is being increasingly recognized that the doctrine of the One Allah had its native Arabian roots, and that Mohammad appealed to an autochthonous religious consciousness. *Allah* did not arise out of Mohammad’s original summation of all gods into one God. This was already posited in the Arab consciousness, and Mohammad’s diatribes against polytheism are similar to those of the Prophets against the cult of strange gods; their polytheism, he argued, was illogical in view of their fundamental belief in one God. (Montgomery 1934:187)

I would add that the “native Arabian roots” go back further to the progenitors of the major Arabian tribes—the sons of Abraham through Hagar and Keturah, along with Aram and Arphaxad the sons of Shem.

²⁹ Maalouf 2003:132 summarizing the study of Hamilton A. R. Gibb, “Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 271. See also W. Montgomery Watt, “Belief in a ‘High God’ in Pre-Islamic Mecca,” in *Studies in the History of Religions* 31, *Proceedings of the XII International Congress of the International Association of the History of Religions*, ed. C. Jouco Bleeker, Geo Widengren, and Eric J. Sharpe (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1975), 228-234.

The tradition is widespread in the Arab world which associates Ishmael and his descendants with Arabs in general and Muslim Arabs in particular. The esteemed Arab genealogist Ibn al-Kalbi (A.D. 737-818?) made popular the supposed genealogical link between Muhammad and Ishmael, largely through oral tradition. Whether this link is valid or not, clear and even older written records link the ancient nomadic tribes of northern Arabia with Ishmael, as we have noted above (Diodorus of Sicily, the book of Jubilees, Josephus, et al.). Arab genealogists generally trace the Arabians to two main ethnic stocks, the original Arabian Arabs from south Arabia, descended from Joktan (Gen 10:25-26), and the Arabized Arabs from central and northern Arabia, descended from Ishmael. Other Arab genealogists suggest that the original stock of Arabs came from the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula (Maalouf 2003:44-46). In any case, the link between those known in the OT as “people of the East” and the Arabs of Islam is firmly upheld. Twelve references to Ishmael in the Qur’an and numerous post-Qur’anic Islamic traditions³⁰ affirm the central place of Ishmael in Islam and the genealogical link between him and his ancestors to Muslims, whether by literal bloodline to Arab Muslims, or by theological and geo-cultural ties to Muslims world-wide (See Firestone 1990; Eph’al 1976:225-235).

Tentative Conclusions

1. The “children of the East” (*bene qedem*) and related terms in the OT refer to the various nomadic desert-dwelling tribes which inhabited the Arabian Peninsula in biblical times.

2. In OT usage the term “children of the East” includes four main groups: (a) the tribes descended from the thirteen sons of Joktan (great-great grandson of Shem through Arphaxad), which dwelt mostly in the southern and SE part of the Arabian Peninsula; (b) the tribes descended from the twelve sons of Ishmael, son of Abraham through his concubine Hagar, which dwelt mostly in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula; (c) the tribes descended from the six sons of Abraham through his wife Keturah, which dwelt mostly in the central part of the Arabian Peninsula; and (d) the nomadic tribes of Arameans, descended from Aram the son of Shem, who mostly dwelt in the Syro-Arabian Desert (and possibly in Northern Mesopotamia).

30 See Maalouf 2003:46-49 for a summary of the major beliefs about Ishmael and his relationship with Islam, including the story that Abraham personally brought Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca (see Hadith 4:583).

3. The term “people of the East” is never used in Scripture nor extant ANE records to describe the nations found in Lower Mesopotamia (such as Assyria, Babylonia, Persia), but is focused on the nomadic tribes in the desert areas of the Arabian Peninsula.

4. Several biblical references speak of deliverance coming from the east (e.g., Isa 44:28; 45:1) but all these passages predict the coming of Cyrus, king of Persia, who would deliver Israel from its captivity in Babylon, and use the *mizraḥ* (lit. “place of sunrise”), not *qedem* as in the passages referring to the children of the East. *Qedem* is never used as a geographical location with regard to Persia or Babylon, but is a technical term referring to the Syro-Arabian Desert.

5. Many of the tribes of the descendants of Ishmael and the sons of Keturah are mentioned frequently in the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) records of Assyria and Babylon, as well as later records of the Persians and the Greeks.

6. In the early period of biblical history (till about the mid-tenth century B.C.), references in the Bible and ANE are made to the primary progenitors of the nomadic tribes, using such terms as Hagarites, Ishmaelites, Midianites, and Amalekites, but after this period the general term “Arab” comes into use for the desert-dwelling nomads in general, and the various northern nomadic tribes are named according to the individual sons (or grandsons) of Ishmael and Keturah.

7. While the tribal names shift from earlier emphasis upon the primary progenitors to the later reference to individual sons of those progenitors, only one name remains constant throughout: “Children of the East”!

8. The term “Arab” comes into use in the mid-ninth century (earliest mention in 853 B.C. account of the Battle of Qarqar), and refers at first to the nomadic desert-dwellers in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula, and only beginning in the 3rd century B.C. do records appear with this name in southern Arabia.

9. During the late United Monarchy and thereafter in OT times, the HB explicitly uses the term “Arab” and “Arabia” to identify descendants of Hagar/Ishmael and Keturah, and to describe these peoples as “people of the East.” Thus the “children of the East” are clearly considered to be Arabs.

10. Throughout the entire history of the “children of the East” in the OT, there are numerous examples of close and friendly relationships (and even intermarriages) between the people of Israel and the children of the East, as well as certain periods (such as during the time of the Judges) when some tribes of the children of the East engage in hostilities against Israel and vice versa.

11. The moral trajectory of the children of the East appears to mirror that of their western relatives/neighbors Israel. During the patriarchal period from Abraham to Moses, and again during the United Monarchy, while Israel largely remained monotheistic followers of God (*El*, also called *Elohim*), it seems that the “children of the East” were also for the most part monotheistic and faithful to one (and the same) God (*El*, also called *Allah*). Likewise, during the time of the Judges and during the period of the Divided Monarch in Israel/Judah, when the covenant line of Jacob turned to idolatry, the same seems to have happened among the Children of the East, although in both areas the concept of monotheism remained at least in the background.

12. Throughout the OT and intertestamental times in biblical history, the “children of the East” were often attacked by the reigning superpowers (Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome), but continued to survive as one world empire gave way to another.

13. In the later OT history and after OT times, the term “children of the East” refers primarily to north Arabian nomadic tribes of which sons of Ishmael (and Keturah) comprised a major part.

14. By the time of Alexander the Great (312 B.C.) and on through NT times, the terms “children of the East” or “Arabs” refer primarily to the Nabatean Arabs in northern Arabia (whose ancestry possibly may be traced to Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, although this is not certain); they were polytheistic but did not allow any graven images, perhaps because of the dormant monotheism in their cultural background.

15. The continuity between the descendants of Ishmael in the OT and the “Arabians” of the NT “Arabia” is maintained in history and in the consciousness of the Jewish people of the first century A.D. (cf. the book of Jubilees and Josephus).

16. OT prophecies concerning the “children of the East” (involving tribes descended from Ishmael and Keturah) indicated that these tribes of northern Arabia would be the first among the “Gentiles” to bring gifts to the Messiah when he appeared (see especially Isa 42:11, 60:5-7). The Magi of Matt 2 probably came from Arabia in fulfillment of this prophecy, and Paul seems to have gone to Arabia (i.e., Nabatea) for three years after his conversion at least partly in order to honor the priority of the nomadic tribes related to Abraham in God’s plan for the ingathering of the Gentiles to the Messiah.

17. Modern studies of pre-Islamic monotheism have concluded that the monotheistic groups referred to by the Qur’an as *hanifs*, continued a monotheistic tradition among the Arab tribes that went back to the time of Abraham.

18. The Qur'an and other Islamic traditions trace the genealogy of Mohammed and Islamic Arabs to Ishmael son of Abraham. Though the direct link between Mohammed is far from certain, the general genealogical tie between the nomadic tribes of northern Arabia at the time of Mohammed and the nomadic tribes descended from Ishmael has solid support from a biblical-historical perspective.

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